

# A COWBOY CHRISTMAS

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*Cowboys & Angels*



Praise for *A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale*

“It’s good and it moves! Tom Van Dyke tells a rousing tale of a young man learning how to cowboy and finding the girl of his dreams. I’ve written a good 40 western stories and learned a lot from Tom’s book.”

—ELMORE LEONARD  
Novelist

“INSPIRING. *A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale* reveals the true American West but goes even further. A man and woman who refuse to let a soaring relationship disappear is a sign of life on earth at its best.”

—MICHAEL BLAKE  
Author of *Dances With Wolves*

“A GREAT RIDE!”

—BOB BOZE BELL  
*True West* magazine

“*A Cowboy Christmas* is a heartfelt tale of a cowboy's roam. A magical story and delightful read for all seasons.”

—THOMAS COBB  
Author of *Crazy Heart*

“I’m a narrative painter, so as I read this book, the words drew pictures in my mind. These images are vivid and the story feels real. *A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale*, is a welcome addition to my library.”

—HOWARD TERPNING  
Western Artist

“The stuff of novels – A masterpiece. A compelling unforgettable journey. Insightful. Uplifting. Heartfelt. A creative narrative with joyful language captivating my imagination.”

–RUSS GIBB  
Concert Promoter/Educator

“*A Cowboy Christmas* is a warm, well-written tale of a young man discovering himself and the new world during an engaging adventure in the American West. The book took me back in time and sparked memories of when I was working on Western films with my friend John Wayne.”

–DON COLLIER  
Western Film and TV Actor

“*A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale* is a beautiful story for all ages. Not since the work of James Dickey have I read such poetry in a novel. A wonderful remembrance for what the Old West once was. Don’t wait for the film—buy the book now.”

–KEN ROTCOP  
Studio Creative Head of: Embassy  
Pictures, Hanna-Barbera Productions

“Tom Van Dyke has crafted an inspired story of the Old West, Arizona and New Mexico Territories—1873. A well-researched tale of an adventuresome young man carving out a life that most men can only dream about. Hold on tight. It’s a fast ride. This magical tale fits like a vintage Stetson and good pair of boots.”

–MARSHALL TRIMBLE  
Official Arizona State Historian

# A COWBOY CHRISTMAS

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## *Cowboys & Angels*

A Novel

TOM VAN DYKE

PAGE BRANCH PUBLISHING  
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

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*7th Edition*

Revised and Expanded with Additions

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Tom Van Dyke

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*A Cowboy Christmas — Cowboys & Angels*

is a work of historical fiction. Names, characters and events are products of the author's imagination. All characters, events, and any resemblance to persons, living or dead are coincidental.

ISBN 978-0-578-53488-6

Manufactured in the *United States of America*

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For

Mary, who has inspired and shared every trail  
of a creative life

And

Adam, Mark, Grant, Jocelyn, and Walker  
Who made it a joy

## P R E F A C E

I have a long trail of praise for the American cowboy. Leafing through tattered pages of handwritten journals and dust-covered books, and wandering museums admiring masterworks of western artists, I looked beyond the golden frames as windows into America's past, and imagined what the restless spirit of the West was like one hundred fifty years ago for cowboys and sunbonnets on the American frontier—a land once thought to be as far away as the moon.

Inspired, I felt challenged to create a magical story that crisscrosses the expansion of the far West and collides with destiny—a story about cowboys and angels who dared to burn themselves like candles for experiences worth living and values that created strength and revealed character—a story as enduring as the romance of the West.

Embracing a cowboy's flavorful soup of words and expressions, WB tells his story with cowboy wit and humor. Just off the boat, not yet sixteen, his tale begins in 1873, when dreams were chased with reckless abandon, when the pursuit of freedom was a driving force, when life was raw and unforgiving, yet brimming with opportunity. He crosses the Mississippi, and without fear, leaves the muddy shores of civilization behind. With empty pockets, a spark for life, and a wild sense of freedom, he follows his heart searching for adventure and fortune, and discovers the romance.

His roam is filled with all the good stuff: encounters and action, adventure and drama that transcend the boundaries of ordinary existence, inviting us to embrace the magic that dwells within the human spirit.

Well into the magic of his tale, with his body scared and his eyes wide open, he encounters Ginny—an angel, the love of his life. A love that will forever shape their destiny—that sparks a magical connection that defies explanation. But fate, in its mischievous whimsy, entangles WB in a trail accident, setting them adrift on separate paths, their souls forever connected despite the vast distance that separates them. Guided by an insatiable thirst for life, when staying alive was a daily battle, they fearlessly follow the whispers of their hearts, venturing into uncharted territories in search of each other.

As WB and Ginny's destinies unfold, their lives become a testament to the power of love and the resilience of the human spirit. WB's tale paints a vivid portrait of a bygone era, where cowboys and angels roamed a land bigger and more beautiful than any dream teeming with possibility and untamed majesty, finding solace and strength in each other's arms.

*A Cowboy Christmas – Cowboys & Angels* is a tale that reminds us that even in the face of adversity, the human spirit can soar to great heights, overcoming the greatest of challenges in a world where nature's beauty intertwines with the souls of those who dare to chase their dreams and find their place in the grand tapestry of the American West.



## CONTENTS

1. BLOWING IN THE WIND
2. A THIN LINE
3. INTO A MIRAGE
4. DANCING WITH PAIN
5. DUST TO DUST
6. SPARKS AND FUSES
7. APRONS OF GOLD
8. FLAMING ARROWS
9. ABOUT TO CROW
10. THE OLD MAN
11. THE COOK
12. DON'T BE SHY, GIRL
13. ROCKIN' AND ROASTIN'
14. COWBOYING
15. LET'S SPLIT 'EM
16. A LONESOME GO
17. NIGHTHAWKING
18. THE EARTH QUIVERED
19. BLUE WHISTLERS
20. GLOOMY COMPANY
21. IT STARTED TO GROW
22. OUT OF THE DARKNESS
23. THANKS FOR YOUR SONG
24. READY, BUTTON?
25. WILD RUSH
26. SHINED REAL PRETTY
27. MERRY CHRISTMAS, COWBOY

# A COWBOY CHRISTMAS

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## *Cowboys & Angels*

“Columbus discovered America in 1492

Horses arrived in 1519

Cattle arrived in 1521

Then there were *Cowboys*”

— tom van dyke

## BLOWING IN THE WIND

*"It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves."*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

BLOWING IN THE WIND, I wasn't much more than a hayseed, fifteen years old, when I stowed away on a wooden ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean from the old country. Embracing the spirit of the unknown, I embarked on a mystical journey. I was on the trail of adventure, discovery, and fortune in the new world. It was the year I gave up my gold and silver—1873.

The smokestack of the iron horse coughed sparks and bellowed black smoke, while the engineer wolfed the whistle. The rail yard was bustling with action and thrashing with excitement. Yardmen were downloading fat cattle and spent U.S. Calvary horses into the holding pens for transfer. I climbed up the wooden rails of a horse pen to get a better view. A grisly yardman approached me. "You lookin' to bounce around on one of these fresh loads?"

“Yes, sir I am. I’m lookin’ to ripen in the far West.”

“Well, pick out a peach—all champions, just railed back from the Indian Wars on the Western frontier.”

I looked over the champions with awe, dreaming of adventure. “Geronimo, Crazy Horse, General George Armstrong Custer.”

“Ouch! That one didn’t end well.”

“Not for Custer. Can I get a closer look?”

“You got coin?—Gold, silver? I don’t take paper.”

“Yes sir.”

“Ok then.”

There was a lone paint horse off on the opposite side of the pen. As I jumped down into the pen the paint raised his head and perked his ears watching me land. I slowly approached the horses; they eased away as a group. I looked closely at their tired eyes and round teeth.

Without me realizing the paint had quietly nosed up behind me. I placed my hand on the back of one of the horses. The horse shuttered with a vacant eye. The spooky paint moved his head in over my shoulder just short of touching my hand and snorted full out. Startled, I took a quick step back. The paint winked. I couldn’t help but smile, “Hello, friend”

Walking back over to the yardman, he was looking over a manifest on a clipboard. I asked, “What will you take for the paint?”

“The Indian hoss! Ain’t on the manifest. Musta’ got mixed up with the cavalries, somehow

somewhere in Montana.” The yardman glanced over my shoulder at the paint behind me, now limping about in pain favoring his front leg. “Excellent choice!” When I turned to admire the paint his eyes were fixed on me in a gallant stance. The yardman immediately realized something is better than nothing for a lame horse and answered, “Make me an offer.”

“A gold sovereign.”

“Let’s see it . . . OK”

“And a saddle—with tack.”

“I got a nice high-horn Mexican saddle I’ll throw in.”

I pulled a gold coin from my inside vest pocket, revealing my father’s silver pocket watch and chain. “You’re not gonna need a pocket watch where you’re goin’ peaches.” The yardman glanced around to see if anyone was within earshot. “I’ll trade you a modified 1873 Springfield rifle for it—and, you didn’t get it from me.”

“And a box of cartridges.”

“Deal!”

I was saddled up; about to ride out when the paint stumbled awkwardly taking a few lame steps. “Oh no!—I just bought a lame horse!” The smug yardman smiled feeling he got one over on me. “Say hello to Geronimo for—” And before he could finish his snappy goodbye, the spooky paint leaped forward almost leaving me behind.

Out-foxed, left in the dust, the grizzly yardman was furious he had been bamboozled by a horse.

Chasing the rainbow, I started my roam. I crossed

the Mississippi and left the muddy bank of civilization as I knew it. Rumors of free land with vast riches, and the discovery of California gold no deeper than a carrot, had set off a stampede of white-hooded wagons migrating in pandemonium for the land of the setting sun.

The further I plowed from civilization the more of it I found. Remnants left behind by those who dared to venture into the untamed wilderness. Furniture and belongings, once filled with hope and good intention too heavy for mule or ox to haul another day, now lay scattered and picked over along the trails, silent witnesses to the trials and tribulations of those who came before me.

And then with certain predictability, miles up ahead, I'd find graves marked with headboards, and the bleached bones of an ox or horse that travelers were forced to slaughter for lack of food and planning. This was common sight.

Trail-weary mules would haul to a stand-off, refusing to budge. Negotiations—a battle of wills began with a crack of the whip, followed by a barrage of verbal encouragements, blistering the ears of the mules—not fit for the lessons of Sunday school.

Having rested for two hours and satisfied their terms had been addressed, the victors, with another crack of a whip, would launch a momentary charge up the trail. The dust would flood over the top of the wagon wheels and through the spaces between the loops of the canvas ties into the wagon. This combined folly of tongue, temper, whip, and grunt created a sight that made the covered wagons appear to float like ships sailing forth on billowing

clouds, navigating waves of earth and sky.

The scorching sun bore down upon us relentlessly, while the relentless dust, like a sharp-edged blade, etched its presence on our faces, causing noses to bleed and skin to burn. Every man, woman, and child wore a layer of dust—inside and out, their bodies and souls transformed by the unforgiving journey.

Not everyone's wagon made it across the vast prairie. In the quiet solitude of the open prairie the landscape began to change as Arrow and I rode along a well-worn wagon trail showing signs of distress, cluttered with discarded baggage and freshly dug gravesites.

I heard a woman's raving voice as the tall canvas of a wagon came into view. "I'm not here for the ROMANCE!" Her voice got louder and more heated as the wagon moved along slower and slower. "This is your dream. You told me to pack up, we're going West, and you sold the farm. You listened to your half-wit brother and caught his rainbow dreams of California gold. Now it's too HARD?—Too HARD for YOU! You owe me! You owe it to our two children we buried along the way! This is your nightmare and you're bound to it."

By the time I caught up to their wagon, it had come to a complete stop and a desperate man was at the back end of the wagon staring despairingly at a large beautiful wooden piece of furniture. His wife was pacing around off to the side in an agitated state.

I dismounted, "Morning, sir. Can I give you a hand with that? . . ."

". . . Our last drop . . . too heavy to haul one more day." I struggled with the man to lower and move the heavy rosewood sideboard down and off to the side of the trail.

His wife kept pacing without looking over. With a vacant stare the man said, "Wagon's empty. All that's left . . . is moving forward." Sensing their turmoil I walked over to my Indian pony. "Good luck to you both — Ma'am."

As I saddled up, I observed her graceful presence as if she was my mother, make her way over to the sideboard. She delicately traced her fingers over the dusty time-worn surface of the family heirloom revealing the fine craftsmanship and polished finish. In that fleeting moment, she smiled, the veil of time was lifted, transporting her to a world long-gone where memories danced—then with a deep breath as if she had suddenly remembered a forgotten chore, she turned quickly and returned to the wagon.

I watched in awe as she stretched her boot to climb the wooden spokes. Pulling herself up hand-over-hand, she pushed off the hub to the top of the wheel and crossed over to take her place on the wooden seat of the wagon. Gripping the reins, her hands were cracked and calloused. Her beauty once bright and obvious was fading with hardship and toil. Her lips were blistered and her fair skin parched, scrubbed by the wind, sun, and alkaline water, told a story of a woman forged in the crucible of adversity.



But it was her striking eyes—the color of the ocean that held the true essence of her spirit. Like the vast expanse of the ocean, their color mirrored the depths of her soul. They glistened with an unwavering determination, a resolute resolve that echoed the indomitable spirit of the women who embarked on this treacherous frontier. In her steely gaze, I witnessed the unyielding strength and unwavering courage that would shape the destiny of this hostile land. Amidst the bravado of the six-guns and the strength of the sombreros, it was the sunbonnets—angels with their quiet resilience and fierce determination, which would leave an indelible mark upon the untamed wilderness.

In the realm where dust and dreams intertwined, I pressed onward, guided by an unwavering spirit. In the vast expanse of the Great Plains, where solitude stretched endlessly and the arid winds whispered tales of longing, I ventured forth towards the mighty Rocky Mountains.

The trail was cluttered with a motley crew of believers, sorry settlers, Yankee neighbors, Rebel brothers, men whose presence exuded an air of mischief and ill-intent—and me. In their midst, I found myself, a lone, seeking solace in the embrace of the untamed West. Overcome by thirst, I was losing my song and enthusiasm for the lore of the West.

Having endured the endless monotony, of the Great Plains, I slowly approached the rugged foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Rising up in the foothills before me, stood a majestic woodland

forest, a cathedral of towering pine spears piercing the cerulean sky, guarding the blue horizon of paradise.

As I ascended into the foothills, a transformation awaited me, unveiling a sight that would stir the very depths of my weary heart. Within this sanctuary, mountain streams meandered through the verdant landscape, their crystalline waters teeming with vibrant trout, while thundering waterfalls cascaded down rugged rock faces, their ethereal beauty glistening with an otherworldly glow.

Lost in the mesmerizing allure of this hidden paradise, I was looking for a trail of worn passage I could follow westward. The startling “whoop-n-holler,” which I first thought was the war cry of native Indians, set me off on a swift gallop. I threw a quick glance back over my shoulder.

They were three bandits in hot pursuit, looking for loot—my horse, saddle, rifle, anything in my pockets worth a cent. If the likes of me was worth their charge, they had to be desperate.

With rebel yells and caps popping, they were gaining on us. Their bullets buzzed by my ears like angry hornets. I galloped for cover of the tall pines.

The sound of their yells and the whiz-bangs of their bullets were getting closer. I crouched down low on my Indian ponies back consumed with our flight of life and death. I could have said anything, this painted horse was still a mystery to me, with a sharp whistle, I yelped, “Geronimo!” In that moment, my faithful companion unleashed the hidden depths of his blazing speed and agility, another talent he previously concealed, manuev-

ering with the swiftness of an arrow as we sought sanctuary amidst the towering pines. We were fast approaching the fortress, a dense maze of pine boughs and massive tree trunks defended it from intruders. There was no room for us to fit or enter.

The marauders kept coming and their rounds chased us splintering and shattering the bark of the pines.

The river with its roaring rapids was just ahead. If we tried to cross, we'd be sitting ducks. At the river's edge, a narrow path used by elk, deer, and the Indian for passage over the mountain twisted up and followed the bank of the river. We slipped into the fortress of shaded cover. The low hanging pine boughs whipped past us, stinging both our hides.

Our climb slowed to a fast walk, weaving about the switchbacks up the slope, drifting through patches of light streaming through the high branches of the cathedral pines. Rushing up behind us, I could hear the blundering bandits' grumbling the worth and effort of their campaign.

A rifle cracked lead—a branch snapped down smacking me loose from the saddle. Arrow slipped, dislodging rocks and black soil that fell splashing into the river. As he stumbled to catch his footing, I desperately clung on, looking over the sheer edge of the rocky gorge at the fierce deafening rapids of the river below.

The dense trail unraveled. Up ahead was a small clearing that glowed green. Surprised, Arrow jerked with a sudden stop, wide-eyed and snorting. Two bear cubs scampered across the trail—they were not alone! The ROAR startled every living

thing and shook birds from their roosts. Mother was ANGRY! We had just entered her home—uninvited.

I was trapped!

The awesome force of Nature lay in my path and the blazing gunfire and crime of bandits squeezed me from the rear.

Rising up to her full height of seven feet, with a reach to ten, she made a massive impression with snarling teeth. She was prepared to defend her cubs.

With glaring yellow eyes, the silver-tipped hairs on her neck and humpback shoulders were up. Moaning, swinging her head, the extended claws of her paws were ready to thrash.

Nervous and snorting, Arrow pitched and danced around. I turned, hearing the voices of the bandits rustling up the trail from below. I saw the flash of a rifle. The shot echoed, booming and bouncing off the surrounding cliffs and high peaks.

Momma moaned and glanced around looking to see the whereabouts of her two cubs.

The trap was sprung—the moment was now!

Arrow reared up to challenge her size and bolted straight at the grizzly. I lunged forward with all I was worth and let out the ‘rebel yell’ I had just become acquainted with.

The grizzly was struck by the surprise of our charge and momentarily faltered as we pushed past her. With snapping teeth and a whirling swat, momma flicked me up high off the saddle—a returning volley of pine boughs flung me back down—I was headed for the rocks.

Grasping for the saddle horn with my bloody throbbing arm, I dangled over the high-cut cliff of

the raging river below. Righting myself, we bolted up the trail with momma bounding on our heels.

With leaping strides, the nine hundred pound grizzly raced, covering ground—thirty yards, twenty, ten—closing faster than my heart beat. In five she'd be pulling us down. With Arrow's last burst of strength, in a leap of faith, we dashed up and over the high-cut bank and vaulted down into the deep waters of the river below.

The echoing roar of the grizzly standing on the high bank of the river's edge greeted us as we surfaced the water. Arrow was already swimming to the far edge. Red rivulets of blood streamed from the claw marks of my wound. The cold, clear water relieved the pain.

The grizzly swaggered along the steep bank, looking up and down for access. Rising up to her full magnificent height, she let out a shrilling ROAR! . . .

My trail-wise pony made his way up the other side of the steep-winding terrain of a pristine mountain wilderness, yet undefiled by the presence of man.

The scent of pine—Christmas, juniper and wild-flowers of every color—columbine, forget-me-not, and brittle-bush filled my head.

With steady determination, his hooves found secure footholds on the rocky path. I could feel the connection between us growing stronger with each step.

In that moment, I understood that my own journey was just beginning. The hardships and challenges I had faced were mere stepping stones on the path to my destiny.

The river's beautiful but violent rhythm roared with splash and rapid crashes of thundering waterfalls echoing harmony in Nature's symphony, intermingling with the caws of eagles and the whirling winds. Crystal-clear water cascaded down moss-covered rocks, creating miniature waterfalls that sparkled like diamonds in the mist of sunlight.

As we climbed higher, the air thinned and became cooler. With each breath, I could feel the raw power and mystique of an untamed frontier coursing through my veins.

A fragrant breeze whispered through the towering pines, carrying with it a sense of ancient wisdom. I felt the spirits of the land and sky speaking to me, their voices carried on the wind. It was a land where the boundaries of imagination and reality blurred.

Above the high shadows of late afternoon, the tips of the tall pines shimmered in the warm rays of the sun. I slowly approached the crest of the mountain at twilight. I sat there spellbound—gazing at the luminous light glazing the distant western landscape as if it were the *dawn of creation* itself.

In that magical moment, I realized that the West was not just a destination on a map. It was a realm of dreams and possibilities, where the wild and the mystical intertwined. It was a land where one could find redemption and forge a new path, guided by the spirits of the land and the courage within oneself. In the embrace of this pristine wilderness, I felt a sense of belonging and purpose.

The wild and free vision before me rekindled my enthusiasm and spirit. Raw, heavy vapors rose

in harmony from the fertile valley floor up into the glowing atmosphere of boiling red clouds. The beauty of it all was overwhelming, filling my heart with a sense of awe and gratitude.

I watched the shimmering afterglow mesmerized as the theater of light slowly faded into a starlight encore that twinkled and glowed with brilliant constellations and blazing shooting stars.

As the night deepened, the stars above became brighter, creating a celestial tapestry that seemed to dance with the unseen forces of the universe.

I could almost hear the echo of ancient chants and stories, carried by the night breeze. The Native Americans believed that every star held a story, a connection to the past and a guide for the future. I wondered what tales those stars held for me, what destiny awaited me in this vast and untamed land.

## A THIN LINE

THE NEXT MORNING I awoke to a new day rising. Glorious! . . . A new day in a new world . . . The air was crisp and alive with fragrance—a potpourri of pines and wild flowers blooming with wonderment and tranquility in this mountain paradise.

In the distance, perched high on the western slope, stood a frontiersman's shelter, nestled amidst the towering pines. Its weathered logs, hewn with rough hands by a mountain man who must have had a hide as thick as bark, with rugged determination, stood as a testament to the resilience of those who had sought refuge in the wild. Withstanding the relentless onslaught of howling winds and heavy snows that blanketed the mountain top in winter; this humble abode had become a sanctuary in the heart of an untamed wilderness.



The shelter was primitive and crudely built. Inside was dug in, low down, and close quarters of necessity and simplicity. Its low ceiling gave a sense of intimacy and protection from the vastness beyond. A small parched oil-skinned hide window glowed with light. There was a three-legged aspen chair. A tree stump table adorned with trinkets and treasures collected from the wilderness served as a reminder of the adventures that unfolded in these rugged lands. The bed, fashioned with posted rails and bound together by rawhide rope, lay against the wall, covered with hides that exuded the earthy scent of the wild. A grease light served as the cabin's humble source of illumination. The flame, fueled by tallow within a dish, provided a guiding light in the darkest of nights.

This humble abode was a testament to the ingenuity of those who had carved out a life in this unforgiving terrain, finding comfort amidst the challenges that nature presented.

As I sat in the shelter's embrace, a profound sense of reverence washed over me—as if in church. The simplicity of this humble dwelling, juxtaposed against the grandeur of the natural world just beyond its walls, spoke to the core of human existence. It reminded me that amidst the vastness of the wilderness, it is the simple joys, the bonds forged with fellow adventurers, and the resilience of the human spirit that truly matter.

Dusty yet orderly, it contained basic food stores for his return: cornmeal, flour, salt and pepper. A cast-iron skillet rested on the stump. I lifted the cover and found a round tin. I opened the

tin and inside was a spool of line and a fish hook.

Fanning their fins in the clear cool water, the native trout would dart out of sight under cover of the banks at the first sight of an intruder. I had learned at an early age to fish the brooks and lakes with my father and grandfather. Avid anglers, I think my grandfather could talk to the fish—he certainly thought like them: “Laddie, your every motion should mirror nature in approaching their world.

“They are wise, skittish creatures. Your close attention to the smallest detail is required. The soft and boggy banks shivers the water with vibrations from harsh, clumsy movements and pounding footsteps warning the fish of your presence.”

Out of sight, back off from the banks, I carefully placed the worm on the sharp hook so the ends would wiggle lively in front of the trout’s nose.

With a wiggle on the hook and the line tied to a long, thin aspen whip, I crouched down low and with light steps slowly approached the bank of the stream—careful not to disturb the brush. I took a silent position hidden behind the cover of a bush at the water’s edge.

I watched the fast water hugging the bank on the far side of the stream. Reaching over the bank with my long fishing pole, I cast the line upstream and let the worm float naturally with the force of the current over the cold gravel bottom. The thin line glistened and stretched out. The worm whirled down the riffle sinking into the underwater pool where trout are most likely to be found.

As it swirled around the eddy, the tip of the aspen pole twitched. The line went taut with a series of sharp tugs. The whip bowed. I lowered the tip so the trout would not feel the pull of the pole on the line and become aware of my play. Then, I lifted the tip again, slowly drawing the slack out of the line and when I felt the fish solid—I struck quick with a jerk, setting the hook and connecting me with the trout.

The trout surged with a full pull of the hook rising, splashing—bursting the surface of the water. The spring and action of the aspen whip I had selected made for an engaging contest. A battle of twists and flips, I worked and played to tire and land the trout without breaking the line. . . .

With an upward swing of my whip, a good breakfast sailed through the air landing on the green moss of the bank.

I enjoyed the sport of life's thrilling challenge connected *by* a thin line.

I acquired a liking for the high life and the taste of fresh mountain trout as I nursed my arm and regained my strength. My wounds were nearly healed. I wore the scar of the four claw marks as a badge of courage.

On the lakeshore, my breakfast trout filled the skillet and sizzled over the hot coals of a small fire when I noticed the flash of approaching lightning. A summer thunderstorm with gusty winds rolled in howling across the mountain's canopy of high pine.

In a wild rush, I climbed to the very top of a bending, swaying, towering pine in order to

experience the full fury of the storm.

The winds thrashed and the heavens wept. Climbing higher I held firm, a mere mortal amidst the chaos. Whistling and wailing, with crashing torrents of freezing rain, every fiber of my being was whipped and shaken, flipped about *by* the thrilling hand of Nature, as if she sought to test my mettle and reveal the depths of my spirit.

The power of the storm coursed through my veins, infusing me with a primal vitality. I felt invincible, as if the very essence of life itself surged within me, intermingling with the forces that raged around me.

I enjoyed the sport of blowing in the wind. I felt mighty. I felt strong and that my life was unfolding before my very eyes raising the question: Was I a vessel receiving the pulsating energy of life, or was I a conduit through which life flowed out into the world?

Perched high on the rugged face of that towering mountain, I found myself awakened. The embers within me were kindled by the storm of untamed elements. I clung on, drenched and invigorated, as a witness to the awe-inspiring dance of Nature. In the thrill of wind and rain, amidst the raw power of the storm, I realized the boundless potential within me. Life, in all its unyielding magnificence, unfolded before my eyes, and I embraced the revelation that I was an integral part of Nature's grand symphony.

Tossing and twisting I was startled awake from the dreams of my sleep—on the rough face of this

majestic mountain I had come alive. I realized that I was not merely an observer but an active participant in the unfolding drama of existence, forever connected to these wild rhythms that would shape my life. I decided to leave this earthly paradise that very night fearing I may not want to leave the pure air and inspired way in the light of day.

Breaking camp with my saddle in my hands I approached my paint horse, "Actor!—you were running in my dreams partner." I limped around dragging my leg pretending to be injured while I placed the saddle on his back. "Playing lame in the rail yard, and then again near riding out from under me like an Arrow! You're the reason I'm still alive. . . . Where have you been friend?" The paint perked his ears, turned his head and knowingly looked me in the eye. "Apparently you know where you're going." I climbed aboard, "Arrow, take me there." We wandered slowly down out of the enchantment of the moonlit shadows of the towering pines—

## INTO A MIRAGE

INTO A SHIMMERING MIRAGE of scorching hot light, I was transfixed, as the expansive Sonoran landscape unfurled before me. A vision of arid beauty adorned with thorny plants boasting vibrant, showy flowers and majestic sentinels of saguaro cactus, applauding the endless blue sky.

In this vast expanse there was no oasis with refreshing water or comforting shade. The blistering sun beat down mercilessly, scorching the parched earth and intensifying the arid stillness of the desert before me.

Beads of sweat rolled off my furrowed brow, testament to the sweltering heat that bore down upon us. As I surveyed the harsh unforgiving landscape, a desert flatland populated with proud colorful lizards wearing scaly armor, basking in the searing rays atop scorching rocks I asked myself: How could anyone—anything—endure and survive such harsh conditions?

With a fervent prayer for our safe passage from my parched lips, I mustered the strength to venture forth. “Come on Partner. . . . Arrow, let’s go” . . . he didn’t move. I kicked him with my heels, “Git-up!” He remained motionless, unyielding to my pleas. “Arrow!” Frustration welled within me as I kicked my heels against his flanks, desperate for him to heed my command. Arrow merely shook his head—his silent protest evident. He backed, turned, and wandered over into the shade of a scrub mesquite tree and planted himself. . . .

“Good idea.” A smart horse—realizing the wisdom of his choice we waited for the sun to set, patiently biding our time until the scorching rays relinquished their hold on the desert. For in the desert’s unforgiving embrace, patience and resilience became our guiding companions.

The afternoon shadows lengthened, reminding us of the delicate balance between endurance and surrender. And as the sun set below the horizon, we embarked once more. Our spirits emboldened by the mystic beauty that emerged under the cloak of darkness.

We traveled at night under the veil of the starry sky when the desert cooled and bloomed with an eerie beauty. The desert came alive with the howls of life. . . . Coyotes—two sounded like seven. They ate anything they could chew.

Arrow had a slow steady pace and a nose always in search of water. I watched the prowling yellow eyes of wolves following us—waiting for their moment. In this mystical journey, the untamed landscape became a character in its own right,

shaping our destinies, testing our limits, and offering glimpses of the divine.

We hadn't seen a trail or person for days—weeks. On a night of a rising moon, I was startled by the screech of a swooping night owl. I instinctively ducked feeling its feathers graze by me. In that moment, the heartbeat of the night embraced me. Reining up in the vast expanse of the desert, I found myself captivated by the haunting beat of the distant drum. Was it my imagination, conjured by the mystical allure of the night, or was it a tangible presence that danced upon the air?

Arrow stood firm with his ears twitching in time with the rhythms that resonated through the darkness. As I scanned the desert landscape, my eyes were drawn to the full moon rising, casting a glow upon the world. And then, as if guided by unseen hands, a transformation began. The celestial light caressed the moon's face, infusing it with hues of orange and red, like the embers of a long-forgotten fire. And with each passing moment, the drumbeat intensified its primal energy reverberating through the night sky.

And there, amidst this mystical spectacle, a vision emerged before me—a distant encampment with horses and tepees beautifully aglow and alive with the spirit of the People. The soft light of the blood moon illuminated their dwellings, revealing vibrant colors and intricate patterns that seemed to come alive in the night. The encampment pulsed with vitality, a testament to the timeless traditions and spirit of its inhabitants.

With a sense of awe and reverence, Arrow



approached this enchanting haven maneuvering effortlessly among the horses and about the tepees, respectful of the sacred space that surrounded us. The setting that unfolded was one of profound beauty and historic significance—a vision woven with the threads of ancestral wisdom and communal harmony.

As we passed through the circles of family, I witnessed a vibrant tableau of life. Elders, their faces etched with stories of ages past, sat around crackling campfires, their voices carrying the weight of wisdom and experience. . . . Arrow paused; I suspected he recognized a familiar tongue. Steaming kettles were tended by women cooking, while others shuttled their looms, their hands skillfully weaving threads of tradition and heritage.

Arrow navigated through this living tapestry, keenly aware of the sacredness that engulfed us. Strong young men assembled lodge poles, wearing leather legging and pelt vests, exuding an aura of strength and resilience. Laughter echoed in the air as children played, their spirits unburdened by the complexities of the world.

As quickly as this mesmerizing encounter had appeared, it began to fade. The cadence of the drum subsided, and the encampment slipped away. I turned back, gazing over my shoulder, only to find the glowing haven had vanished into the night. My gaze returned to the blood moon, now bathed in a glorious crimson glow.

An amazing sight to behold. . . . It was inspirational, a testament to the ancient bond between the heavens and the earth. And as I took in

this extraordinary panorama, I knew that what I had experienced would forever dwell within the depths of my soul, a sacred memory that bridged the realms of the ordinary and the extraordinary.

As we rode on the echoes of the drumbeat and the lingering presence of the encampment remained etched in my being, a reminder of the timeless spirit of the old West.

THE RISING SUN BURNED OFF the blue shadows of morning; I became aware of a faint, far-off squeaking sound. Miles ahead, I approached three covered wagons traveling west with a squeaky wheel.

For safety and good company, I thought it best to attach myself to the wagon train. I was loping up when I noticed her brushing her hair in the back of the wagon:

*“Oh my, an Angel!—she was made of sugar.”*

I slowed Arrow to a walk, keeping up with the rolling wagon. I removed my hat and said, “Hello. Allow me to introduce myself.”

“Hello,” she smiled. “You have my full attention—for the next 500 miles.”

In a breath she stole my heart.

I loved her at first sight. Ginny had long flowing golden hair, divine eyes sparkling with life, sculpted features, and cherry lips—I wanted to kiss.

We talked and laughed. Her laughter was captivating. Smart and witty, she was raised on books and in time we discovered each other. . . .

We worked for our supper. I gathered wood for our cook fires and Arrow found water in the cotton woods.

Over time the squeaking became more annoying. Ginny's father appeared instantly, the moment I rigged a rawhide pouch that dripped a thick mixture of soap and bacon grease on the hub, silencing the squeaking wheel grinding on the iron axle of their wagon. And with a nod Virgil said, "Pretty clever, boy."

As we continued our journey our love grew stronger with each passing day. We found strength in each other's presence, drawing inspiration from the raw beauty that surrounded us. The Arizona landscape unfurled like a painting before our eyes. Together, we navigated the challenges of the trail, our hearts intertwined as we ventured further into the unknown.

Stargazing and cuddling by campfires with Ginny, we studied the heavens and watched the shooting stars leave trails in the sky. "There's the Big Dipper," pointed Ginny.

"Right beside Polaris, the North Star," I said.

"And together they are the timekeepers for the heavens," said Ginny. "The Big Dipper rotates counter-clockwise around the North Star every twenty-four hours." Holding her hand above her head, she clinched her fist, pointing her forefinger straight up as if the panhandle of the Dipper. "It's ten o'clock now and the Dipper is here." Moving her hand, "At midnight it will be here, at two a.m. it will be here."

Reaching over, I cupped my hands into a pail of water. A ripple of anticipation coursed through me. "This is for you, Ginny." I held my hands out to her.

Smiling with intrigue, "What's for me?"

"Look." Ginny's curiosity sparked, and she leaned in closer, peering at the reflection of the moon cupped in my hands.

"Oh! Is this a promise?" her voice laced with wonder and hope.

I gazed at her, inspired by her beauty aglow in the radiance of the moon. . . .

"Promise?" I asked. It was the first time a girl had ever gazed upon me with such loveliness, opening feelings of passion to me and my emotions.

"Are you promising me the moon?"

I delighted in her gaze. Her smile illuminated the night, casting a glow upon our embrace. Our back-and-forth volley in that tender moment was my awakening. Her glow gave my heart flight. So pure she was, I fumbled for words rising to her poetry. . . .

"As I hold this heavenly glow in my hands, I promise you the Moon, and under all the stars in heaven, with every beat of my heart I will always and forever love only you all the days of my life."

We held each other close in that sacred moment, time standing still as our spirits intertwined. In a shared look of devotion Ginny whispered, "Your hands hold the Moon and my heart forever. From this holy night I will love only you all the days of my life."

From that moment, our love transcended the boundaries of time and space, guided by the infinite power of love—we were inseparable.

And, in the tall grass, we stole away . . . It was the happiest time of my life. . . .

And Ginny wasn't far behind. She told her

mother, "He loves me Mama and I love him."

"No you don't, Ginny!—How do you know?—how can you tell?"

"His eyes tell me. The way they lay on me. He's strong and smart too." Ginny was passionate, "I have feelings for him Mama, his lips, his—"

"Hush child, you froth too much," putting her hands to her ears.

Ginny had a natural innocence that required vigilance and for her folks to be on constant watch for coyotes.

Her father took one look at WB and knew: tall, lean, and good-looking, he's on the loose.

We were rumbling around in the back of the covered wagon out of view. Ginny's mama was driving the team. Ginny was giggling and laughing when Mama yelled back, "Virginia, what's goin' on back there?"

". . . Nothin', Mama."

I glanced at Ginny, mischief twinkling in her eyes. "Uh-oh. . ."

Well, let me tell you, Mama's whistle could shatter glass. "Virgil!" she shrieked, her voice echoing across the desert, "Ginny's bundling up again!"

In a panic, we scampered, getting ourselves together knowing full well that the chaperone was on his way, a big man with an Arkansas toothpick.

Lickety-split, I climbed out of the work end of the covered wagon, untied Arrow who was trailing along and jumped on. By the time Pa busts up, I was a choirboy with my harmonica, serenading my prairie rose.

Pa glared at me, brandishing his hefty knife as if he's going to shave me *reeaal* close. "Now, Pa," Ginny protested, her voice full of faux innocence, "W's just playin' me a melody."

If looks could kill, I would've been six-feet under.

Squinting hard and drawing the toothpick under his eyes, "Walker Brady, I'm eyein' you, boy." Slowly, Pa put the big knife back into its sheath and rode back up ahead . . . out of sight, Virgil grinned to himself and winked at Ma.

And so, we continued our journey, with me serenading Ginny, and Pa eyeing me suspiciously from a distance. It was a comical dance of music, disapproval, and young love, all set against the backdrop of the vast and untamed territory.

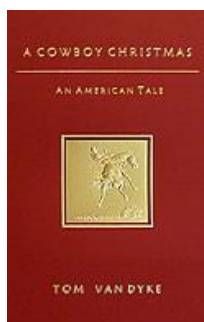
Ginny rocked her head with a mischievous smile and I trotted along with my serenade.

"I don't think your pa likes my music."

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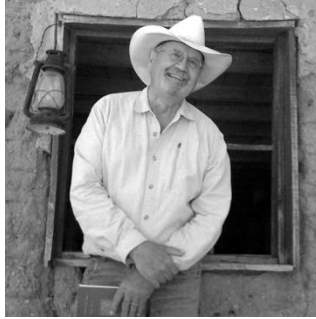
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## A COWBOY CHRISTMAS

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tom Van Dyke lives with his wife, Mary on their ranch in the foothills of Tonto National Forest, Cave Creek, Arizona. Tom is a nationally recognized film producer/director and award-winning screenwriter and best-selling author. One of his motion pictures was considered for nomination of an Academy Award®.

Tom created and wrote the American Bicentennial television public service announcements, *Stand Up and Be Counted*, featuring John Denver, the most widely viewed national and international PSAs in the history of television.

His creative expression of writing and film production is shared with his creation of fine art. Tom's photography, sculptures, and paintings have been exhibited or are in the permanent collections of the NY Museum of Modern Art, the Carnegie Art Institute, the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Henry Ford Museum, the Cranbrook Academy of Art, the Heard Museum, and the Butler Institute of American Art.

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